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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

The status of women in the world today shows evidence of progress made in gender equality since the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and subsequent reviews Plus Ten (2005) and Fifteen (2010). However, poverty, violence against women and girls, including human trafficking and lack of or inadequate educational opportunities prevent millions from enjoying the quality of life everyone deserves.

There is reluctance in countries around the world to make the education of women a primary goal in developmental plans. In many countries approaches to women's advancement are hindered by traditional social and cultural norms and gender concerns are left out of national economic development plans. Women are excluded from decision-making structures in many communities and lack sufficient representation in national parliaments. Hence national and regional development plans do not address the structural causes of poverty that keep women in oppressive and subservient roles.

In many countries in Africa, Latin America and other regions, women are the main agricultural workers. They are responsible for preparation of fields, carrying water, planting and caring for crops, often using only a hoe. The men may help in the harvesting process. Thus, although women have a major role in all agricultural work, they are not present at the meetings where agricultural decisions and plans are being made on national and local levels. Poverty affects the entire household yet the gender division in labour and in the responsibilities for the family's welfare places a disproportionate burden on women and girls. In many developing countries the welfare system does not provide for women who are living in poverty. When a woman has children and must take care of them alone she finds herself in a very precarious position. The risk of falling into abject poverty is greater for women than for men. Older women are sometimes abandoned and are unable to support themselves.

The lower position of women in society makes them targets for exploitation as seen in the large number of women who are forced into prostitution or who are trapped into roles as sex workers against their wishes. This vulnerability is seen in many of the nations where women are not valued as equal citizens. The scourge of human trafficking, modern day slavery, thrives when extreme poverty is the fate of a majority of citizens. Women and girls, as well as men and boys, who lack education and employment opportunities, are easy prey for the criminal enterprises that profit at their expense.

Women's empowerment is key to resolving many of the underlying social and economic development problems, such as violence against women and girls, poverty and hunger reduction, gender parity in elementary and secondary education and environmental sustainability. Lack of legal protections for people's human rights and entitlements to decent livelihood, safety, health and education are major barriers to empowerment.

The United Nations plays a major role in calling Member States to fulfil their obligations as signatories to the Declaration of Human Rights, promotion of social and economic development goals, protection of Earth and its natural resources. Since its existence there have been positive advancements in all of these areas and statements calling for significant changes abound. Yet, conditions today for the majority of the world's poor and in a special way that of women who live in abject

poverty and lack even the basic necessities of a decent life such as, food, housing, basic education, healthcare and opportunity for employment that provides a living wage cry out for justice and equality.

The 57th Commission on the Status of Women in 2013 was the largest international meeting on ending violence against women and called for action. It noted, among other things that up to 70 per cent of women in some countries face physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. Millions of women and girls are trafficked in modern-day slavery and rape is a tactic of war. Michele Bachelet, United Nations Women Executive Director in her opening address cited five key areas for action.

Strengthen implementation of laws, policies and programmes for preventing and responding to violence against women and girls.

Place more focus on preventing violence against women and girls.

Address prevention and response together as part of a comprehensive and coordinated strategy to be effective.

Establish comprehensive and accessible multi-sectoral services and responses.

Reliable data, analysis and research are essential to inform the development of laws, policies and programmes on violence against women and girls.

We Maryknoll Sisters promote empowerment of women through elementary and secondary education of girls and leadership training for women in countries where we work in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Victims of sexual abuse and trafficking are provided social services needed to overcome physical and emotional trauma and education and training required to earn a living.

We affirm the 2013 Civil Society Declaration, 5 February 2013 at the Fifty-first Session of the Commission for Sustainable Development. It states: "In a globalized world driven by financial engines, one can sometimes lose sight of the people and the planet that are to be assisted and protected. When wealth and power are sought as ends in themselves there is a danger that ... the common good is reduced to fit the outcomes achievable by private and for profit firms ...

"For some, the only way to achieve development is through the market. This has tended to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few ... It has been noted 'Economic Activity cannot solve all social problems through the simple application of commercial logic. This needs to be directed towards the pursuit of the common good, for which the political community in particular must also take responsibility. Therefore, it must be borne in mind that grave imbalances are produced when economic action, conceived merely as an engine of wealth creation, is detached from political action, conceived as a means for pursuing justice through redistribution.'" Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, 36.

The Commission for Social Development, 52nd Session, 11-24 February, 2014 in preparing a post-2015 agenda for sustainable development reviewed the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals. In terms of empowerment of women, results have been mixed. Whether or not having separate Millennium Development Goals raised unrealistic expectations as to potential improvements in the lives of the most impoverished women is unclear. On the one hand a dedicated goal on gender is a powerful symbol of a commitment to "mainstreaming" gender.

On the other hand it fails to acknowledge that gender is a cross-cutting issue which needs to be part of all discussions on human development.

Maryknoll Sisters are committed to supporting the work of the 59th Commission on the Status of Women in its ongoing efforts to eliminate poverty and hunger in the world, especially among the poorest and most marginalized, the majority of whom are women and children.